

Just a country-mile behind the whole world by dearmad

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Summary: You know those AU fix-it stories where everybody lives happily ever after? This is its opposite.

Just a country-mile behind the whole world

Once upon a time Jonathan thought he could kill a monster and get the girl of his dreams. He failed at both.

That Saturday night the three of them sit on the porch of Jonathan's house. All the windows are wide open in a desperate attempt to get rid of sickening smell of gasoline and burnt flesh. It's eerily quiet. Dark. It seems like the Upside Down seeped through all the cracks left in their universe and is now permanently lodged within them. The lights are no longer flickering but the stillness around them is almost as menacing as the headache inducing chaos of the last couple of hours. Steve looks between the other two from time to time like he's trying to figure out if it's the right moment to ask all the questions but he thankfully doesn't. They're all exhausted, so staying here and waiting for the news seem like the best idea. It's about 2 a.m. when they hear a car approaching and Jonathan raises from his seat with too much hope in his heart.

But Hopper arrives alone.

There are explanations and words like oxygen deprivation, resuscitation, cardiac arrest and Nancy's soft touch on his arm and *gone gone gone*. It's all a cacophony of ugly sounds that Jonathan wants desperately to drown in music that he will never share with Will again. His eyes are burning and Hopper's hand on his shoulder is too heavy, tethering him harshly to the reality he can't acknowledge yet.

"I... I should go help mom," he finally utters. "And Will... I need to see Will."

He dashes back home and dry heaves in the bathroom, the thought of going to the morgue again making him sick to his stomach.

When he comes back Nancy moves towards him slowly, cautiously as if unsure if she should even be there. Steve avoids his eyes. He bypasses them both and heads straight to the car.

"Go home, Nancy. Mike is going to need you," he hears Hopper telling

her firmly. " And you," he points to Steve, "whoever you are, drive her home, ok?"

Hopper goes to deal with whatever practicalities might be involved in case a local child dies *twice* using what he calls his "usual charm" which in Jonathan's opinion means either punching or bribing appropriate people. Probably both. His mother is sitting still, like a wax figure in a ludicrous hazmat suit, so he approaches her carefully, silently begging her to be the strong one because frankly *he can't do it again*. She notices his wounded hand and it jolts her from her daze. He protests when she frantically tries to find someone to check it. It's just a cut. He's the surviving son.

The hospital staff is preoccupied with multiple casualties from the "weird incident at the middle school" so he gets stuck with a nurse in training. She's young and pretty with round green eyes and short blond hair that would look great in the early morning light. She unwraps his bandages with a professional disinterest, looking at him expectantly, shapely eyebrows raised in the silent question of "How did this happen?"

"Hunting accident," he replies after a moment. It's not a lie but he doubts she'd care either way.

She disinfects the wound and he doesn't pretend it doesn't sting like he did when Nancy's thin hand poured a bit too much of Lonnie's leftover vodka and he sucked in his breath to hide the sudden pain. She wraps his hand with a fresh gauze and tosses Nancy's along with the gloves into the trash. She never asks him if it's too tight (*it is*).

Hopper drives them back home, solemn and quiet. His mom doesn't say anything when she sees the state of their house, just sits in their ruined living room and buries her head in her hands.

He desperately wants to hide in his room. He wants to disappear under the safety of his covers like when he was four and all the monsters were just a trick of his imagination fuelled by the howling wind outside the window. Before he manages to escape he feels his mom's trembling fingers grab his forearm and pull him towards the couch. And then he's wrapped in the warmth of her arms, her hand

gently caressing his hair. He fights back his tears and melts into her hug. He doesn't know how long they stay this way. He thinks he hears Hopper moving around the house, assessing the damages and clearing the bear trap. His mother kisses the top of his head and murmurs soothing words.

"I love you so much," she tells him and he squeezes his eyes as tightly as possible to keep them from spilling any tears. "You were the quietest baby I've ever seen, you know? Sleeping through the night, never fussing. Your father used to say he could have dozen more kids if they'd be all like you."

Jonathan tenses at the mention of Lonnie and she notices it immediately.

"I just want you to know you are loved," she says, her voice hitching a bit and he buries his head further in her shoulder unable to stop the anguished sob escaping his lips.

Jonathan makes mental lists of things he knows and things he used to know.

He used to know that you die once and there's a funeral. He used to know that you buy a coffin and dig a grave. He used to know that children don't disappear into nothingness just to be brought back from it covered in slime and dirt and oh so cold.

He knows there's Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year's happening. He knows there's school and work to go to. He knows his mom is trying her best to keep their family together and he knows he's trying his best to not fall apart but it's all bullshit because he's only 16 and he just lost his brother to a fucking monster crawling through a fucking wall. It's just too stupid to accept.

So he makes mental lists of things he did (*does*) instead: wash the dishes, kiss your mom goodbye, go to the woods, kill a monster, dig a grave, fail.

That winter Hopper quickly becomes more of a permanent fixture. He first comes over to fix the wall. Then the hallway. He's fixing the

porch and Jonathan's car and the door screen and he never seems to run out of things that need to be repaired.

"You can't fix us," Jonathan tells him one day when he finds him cursing at the kitchen sink that definitely wasn't leaking before. He's not sure if Hopper doesn't hear it or just purposefully ignores it because he never mentions it afterwards.

He packs a few things from Will's room in February and brings them over to the Wheelers. Some comic books, a couple of sketches, one picture he took of the four boys dressed up in old sheets and wigs ready for an adventure.

"I thought maybe you guys would want to have those," he tells to surprised Mike. "Your friendship... it meant all to Will."

Mike takes the box carefully as a flicker of sorrow passes over his face. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe it already belongs to the past. But he's already here, in a house that Will knew so much better, handing his grief in a non-distinctive cardboard package. Jonathan knows he should go but he can't help sneaking glances around the place.

"She's not home," Mike says knowingly. "She's out with Steve. It's... it's Valentine's Day."

Jonathan nods and leaves embarrassed.

He turns 17 in April and Joyce wants to throw him a birthday party.

"It's going to be great. You can invite all your friends," she tells him enthusiastically but desperation is clear in her voice. *Please say you're not alone in this world.*

"I think they're busy with school, mom," he lies because it's easier than telling her there's no one to invite.

She still bakes him a chocolate cake and Hopper comes over with a pizza (sausage and pepperoni - *Will's favourite*). The cake tastes bitter on his tongue but he gives Joyce an encouraging smile and thanks her for the 35mm films she got him anyway. The whole thing feels

grotesque, like he's celebrating not being the dead son. He knows he should be somewhere out there getting drunk on cheap beer, trying to get laid, doing stupid shit like any other teenager instead of sitting at home with his mother and their... well, whatever Hop is to them.

Nancy comes over a couple of days later. He used to think she could belong here, in his battle-scarred house with her deceptively frail frame but now that she's standing outside his front door, looking so out of place, he understands how wrong he was. She holds a small box in her hands which she gives to him with a blinding smile.

"Happy birthday!"

He's slightly perplexed to say the least. For one he has no idea how she found out it was his birthday. There were no fliers for Jonathan Byers Big Birthday Bash. *Ever*. Not even when he was 8 and every kid was forced to invite every other kid in their class. Also the gift is wrapped in a Christmas paper, which is decidedly not of this season. For a moment his gaze shifts from the box to her eyes until he feels he's staring like a creep she once called him and decides to look away.

"We... *I* got you this for Christmas but just wasn't sure if I should come over and you'll see it's not really a gift," she babbles and he tries to ignore the slip of the tongue. "Your mom mentioned you not feeling well when I called and I just... "

She looks around and finally puts her hand on his arm. Her fingerless gloves are pristine white but he remembers how they looked with blood and inter-dimensional dirt on them.

"Jonathan," she whispers and he feels his stomach flutter at the sound. She leans in and places a soft kiss in the corner of his mouth. It's barely a touch but it leaves a burning trace that Jonathan feels all through the day. Until he gets to school the next morning and spots her smiling fondly at Steve. He disappears into the crowd without her noticing.

He catches Hop trying to sneak out of their house one early Sunday morning in July. He looks so comical that Jonathan just rolls his eyes

and invites him to stay for breakfast. He wishes he had his camera when he sees the look on his mother's face that morning. He smiles tentatively at her and the pull of his lips feels strange, like he's suddenly remembering he can do that but is too rusty to do it properly. But as she hums to herself, Joyce has a warm, serene glow about her that he thought all but disappear in November and he remembers that one morning when he was around Will's age and found her dancing to the radio in the kitchen. He can almost taste that feeling of pure happiness as he was bouncing next to her singing about pretty girls named Sharona and things he didn't really understand until the moment he saw Nancy Wheeler smoothing her pink dress outside the school.

The upside of having your life messed up by a creature from a different universe is the inevitable creativity that it brings to your heartache. No other experience could have impacted Jonathan as much and who cares if his photos are darker and more unsettling now than ever? It gets him into NYU on an early admission. "Rare maturity". That's how they called his portfolio. He graduates high school and Joyce and Hopper both clap and cheer for him like maniacs when he gets his diploma. Nancy is the valedictorian and she gives an inspiring speech about overcoming obstacles and slaying metaphorical dragons that life throws at you. Jonathan doesn't think they're metaphorical. She waves at him to come over where she's taking pictures with her family but he just waves back and goes home. He packs his life up and leaves the next day.

New York is different in all best ways possible and Jonathan drinks it all in in one big gulp. He's no longer Jonathan Byers - that creep who lost his little bro in weird circumstances. He's an NYU student who drinks cheap booze at his dorm parties and catches late night line to East Village and takes hundreds of stupid pictures in Washington Square Park. He's Jonathan Byers who's creepy enough to be a photography major in New York in 1985. He's Jonathan Byers who's mysterious enough to be considered attractive by the tall brunette in his Art History 101 class. He thrives.

"Indiana, huh?" She says one night when his roommate is out and they've exhausted themselves with things he knows he's super late to

experience. "Must've been boring as hell."

He doesn't correct her. Just silences her with a small bite to her inner thigh.

That first year of college he goes home for Thanksgiving to help Joyce pack up Will's room for good. They sell the furniture but meticulously put every toy, every book, every piece of clothing into boxes that they store in the shed outside the house. They both refuse to let him go completely so they keep him at the hand's reach. Not exactly in their lives, but not exactly gone. Jonathan knows perfectly well it's not healthy. A few months later Hopper moves in and they redo the whole house. Will's room disappears completely.

He sees a tall figure standing in front of Will's grave and it takes him a moment to recognise Mike. He keeps forgetting that for the rest of them time didn't freeze in 1983, that it's only Will who will forever stay 12.

"How often do you come here?" He asks Mike curiously because for some reason he never thought about it before.

Mike shrugs.

"Not as often as I should," he finally replies, his voice deep and so different. "I just... I'm scared that one day he'll be like that kid who died when we were young. You know what I mean? Like a childhood anecdote or some shit like that."

Jonathan nods pensively but wonders if this isn't how life works anyway.

"Anyway I want to ask Jennifer out and I needed Will's permission for that," Mike continues with a chuckle. "She had a crush on him back then, you know? It's stupid but I felt like I'd betray our friendship if I didn't come here. I don't think he even liked her..."

Jonathan digs out a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and quietly lights one. He can see Mike eyeing him apprehensively. He finally takes another one out and offers it to him. The teenager takes

it immediately with a small embarrassed smile.

"My parents would kill me if they knew," Mike adds between greedy drags. "They're such assholes."

Jonathan snorts at that. Out of everything that he thought would happen that day having a smoke with his dead brother's best friend was as probable as getting it on with the said guy's sister.

"She's never coming back," Mike says suddenly and for a second he seems 12 again. It takes a moment for Jonathan to understand whom he's referring to. "I thought it's about time I moved on. Jennifer's pretty and... It still feels weird. But hey, you moved on after Nancy so everything's possible, right?"

He has a teasing glint in his eye and Jonathan knows he's joking but his heart still skips a beat at that. He takes the cigarettes out again and shoves them in Mike's hand.

"Who said I did?" He tells him and quickly turns away before Mike can even register the gravity of what Jonathan just admitted. He thinks he can hear him call his name but doesn't look back as he drives away past the *You're Now Leaving Hawkins* sign.

He comes home from work one late evening and finds her sitting in front of his door. He's so surprised he stays glued to the spot, unable to move closer.

She rolls her eyes and gets up with a huff.

"I've been waiting here for hours. Do you ever come home?"

She's wearing a worn out leather jacket and black heels, her hair short and curly. She looks older than he thought she would but then again it's been years since high school.

"Been visiting some friends in Philly, I thought I'd drop by," she says like it's the most obvious thing in the world that Nancy Wheeler would occasionally come to a shitty apartment in New York City to see her old... almost-friend? ally? monster hunter? Her old *almost*. "Mike gave me your address. Should I feel offended that you gave it

to my little brother but not to me?"

Jonathan still tries to come up with something to say. Small talk was never his forte. No talk was actually his forte if he's being honest.

"Hide your enthusiasm, Jonathan. No, please, don't invite me in," she tells him teasingly.

"He was curious about CBGB," he finally chokes out.

"What?"

He opens the door and tries not to stare at her ass when he lets her in.

"Your brother. He was wondering if I lived anywhere near it."

He quickly inspects his apartment. It's a mess, photo equipment mixed with clothes over the floor and his bed. Pizza boxes on the small table. He looks around helplessly not sure if he should start by apologizing or cleaning it up. Nancy lets out a small laugh, takes off her jacket and shoves his sweater off a chair to sit down.

"I promise I won't tell your mother."

He smiles at that and takes out two bottles of beer from the fridge.

"I wasn't expecting any company so it's either beer or tap water," he offers apologetically. For some reason he's embarrassed. Nancy Wheeler always seemed like a classy, expensive wine kind of a girl but then again, he's been consistently wrong about her.

She takes the beer bottle clearly amused by his fluster. Ok, so he was wrong again.

"So... how are you?" He mentally slaps himself for sounding so idiotic.

Thankfully she indulges him and for the next twenty minutes she chats about everything and nothing in particular. She tells him about her new job in Boston, Mike's college graduation, Steve's baby daughter, people and places that were never truly part of his world.

"What are you doing here, Nancy?" He finally interrupts her.

She takes a deep breath and gulps down the last of her beer before answering.

"Last year I was helping Mike move his stuff to his new apartment and he has that picture of the four of them. You know which one? I'm pretty sure you're the one who took it. I think they were 8 or 9 dressed up as wizards or elves or whatever they were that week."

Jonathan gives her a quick nod. Somewhere outside a police siren broadcasts someone's tragedy with a piercing wail that he no longer notices. Nancy's restless fingers are peeling off the label of the beer bottle.

"And I kept thinking about that night. I kept obsessing about it and I haven't done that in years. What if your mom got there sooner? What if Will survived?"

He bites his lip hard and turns away to grab another beer. He hasn't obsessed over it in years either. But she's not finished yet.

"So stupid but... we were sitting on that trashed couch and what if you kissed me then."

His hand freezes on the fridge door as she continues.

"And after everything I tried so hard to be there for you but I was 16. 16, Jonathan! And you were so impossible to reach and I had my own nightmares to handle..."

She quiets down and lets out a deep sigh. He sits down across from her, the second beer already forgotten.

"I know," he whispers regretfully. "I'm sorry, too."

She has tears in her eyes but finally cracks a small, unsure smile.

"I don't know what to say," he admits sheepishly and checks his watch. "Uh... Friday night, we can go for a drink if you want?"

She slowly shakes her head no and takes his left hand in hers

checking for a faint scar that they used to share.

"Mine healed completely," she tells him when he moves her hand closer to see. There's an edge to her voice that he hasn't heard in a very long time. The same tension he felt that night when he thought he could have it all. *Kill the monster. Win the princess' heart.*

He traces her sharp collarbone with hesitant fingers and he feels her burning gaze as he's raising goosebumps along her bare arm. It's measured, unrushed. Long deliberate kisses that drown any sound and leave them breathless. Her body arching under his palm. Moonlight filtering through the blinds covering the window and leaving patches of blueish light on his shoulders. Dark night turning into bright morning.

"Don't be a stranger, ok?"

She tells him with one last kiss as she disappears down the hallway. He takes the piece of paper with her phone number hastily scribbled on along with a roll film he will never develop and shoves them into a shoe box in his closet.

He doesn't tell her when he moves to London a couple of months after that. He knows Nancy was always the stronger one. The one who slayed her dragons and grieved and lived. He's still fighting his.

AN/ Clearly there wasn't enough of sad, angsty fics in this fandom so I felt my duty to add to it ;) Apologies. I think I got all of Stranger Things fics out of my system now.

The title's from The Smiths' Miserable Lie which is a song I have a love/hate relationship with.